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## Gates, governors: Upgrade high school

**By Corey Murray, Associate Editor, eSchool News  
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Implored by Microsoft chairman Bill Gates and others to redesign America's high schools to meet the challenges of the new century, governors and policy makers from nearly every state in the nation met Feb. 26 to March 1 to hash out a plan to keep America's high school students from falling behind their counterparts in other industrialized nations, among other goals.



Better use of student data and more creative approaches to teaching and learning--including the judicious use of technology--were among the focal points as governors from more than 45 states and territories convened in Washington, D.C., this past weekend.



At a time when only 71 percent of U.S. students graduate from high school and less than one-fifth of the nation's ninth graders go on to earn a college degree, Virginia Gov. Mark Warner, a Democrat and chairman of the National Governor's Association (NGA), called on his colleagues in every state to redesign America's high schools for success in the 21st century.

The four-day governors' meeting--which concludes today at the J.W. Marriott Hotel, about two blocks from the White House--kicked off Feb. 26 with the first-ever National Summit on High Schools, from which education leaders and governors emerged on Sunday with an agenda they hope will encourage schools to uphold stricter standards and prompt students to accept the challenge of a tougher education. The event was sponsored by Achieve Inc., a nine-year-old organization that brings business leaders and governors together to focus on better preparing students for the rigors of college.

Governors in attendance said they plan to work with educators in their states to raise expectations for student achievement, identify ways their states can transform high schools to create more options for struggling learners, and increase the quality of teaching and leadership in the nation's secondary schools--all goals that technology is likely to have a significant impact on. From building complex data-tracking systems to monitor student progress, to providing advanced online coursework for students or virtual professional development programs for teachers, technology's implications for high school reform abound, Warner said.

"This summit is a major step forward in what I hope will be sustained momentum toward comprehensive reform in dozens of states across the country," he said. "It's



Virginia Gov. Mark Warner called the summit on high schools 'a major step forward.' (Photo courtesy National Governors Association)

time to turn rhetoric into reality."

And change must come soon. According to recent statistics from the international Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United States now ranks 16th among developed nations in high school graduation rates and 14th in the percentage of students who go on to earn a college diploma. And those statistics don't even take into account the competition that U.S. students face from their counterparts in developing countries such as China and India, where single universities have been said to churn out more engineering and technical graduates per year than every university in the United States combined.

"We have a lot who aspire but few who attain," said Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, a Republican who is vice chairman of the NGA.

It's a reality that has Microsoft founder Bill Gates worried--not only for the good of America's students, but for the future of the nation and especially its economy, which has faltered since the boom of the late 1990s.

"Training the workforce of tomorrow with the high schools of today is like trying to teach kids about today's computers on a 50-year-old mainframe," Gates said during a stirring, 30-minute keynote speech Feb. 26 in which he chided America's high schools for becoming "obsolete."

"Our high schools were designed fifty years ago to meet the needs of another age. Until we design them to meet the needs of this century, we will keep limiting--even ruining--the lives of millions of Americans every year," Gates said, not mincing his words.

"Everyone who understands the importance of education; everyone who believes in equal opportunity; everyone who has been elected to uphold the obligations of public office should truly be ashamed that we are breaking our promise of a free education for millions of students."

Gates, along with his wife Melinda, has donated close to a billion dollars to education reform through the couple's foundation, which urges the creation of smaller, more intimate high schools where students are encouraged to explore and exploit their various personal interests en route to a meaningful career.

During his remarks, which were twice interrupted for applause, Gates told lawmakers about a recent trip he took to High-Tech High in San Diego, one of a handful of uniquely designed high schools across the country, where technology is fully embedded into the curriculum and students achieve most of their learning through project-based assignments intended to simulate real-world situations. (See [New 'high-tech' high schools aims to transform learning](http://www.eschoolnews.com/news/showStory.cfm?ArticleID=2245); <http://www.eschoolnews.com/news/showStory.cfm?ArticleID=2245>)

"One young student told me that High-Tech High was the first place he'd ever gone to where being smart was cool," Gates said. During Gates' visit, the student demonstrated a project he'd been working on involving a submarine. "It was an incredible experience talking to him," recalled Gates, "because his life really did hang in the balance."

An executive at heart, Gates used his speech to outline three steps he feels are critical to improving the plight of America's high school students.

First, he said, each state must commit to preparing all of its students for success in "college, work, and citizenship." Rather than equipping kids, especially the traditionally low achievers, with the kinds of skills they need simply to get by, Gates called on every state to prepare every student for a college education.

Time and again, governors who heard Gates speak reiterated his charge, warning that the new knowledge-based economy will make it increasingly difficult for future workers to survive and raise a family on low-wage, low-skill jobs.

Second, Gates called on states to do a better job of publishing and tracking student data, so educators and other stakeholders might identify the different social and economic variables that contribute to the disparity between rich and poor students in the public school system.

And third, he implored governors and education leaders to take a new approach to high schools and curriculum design. "If we believe all students can learn--and evidence proves they can--then when students don't learn, the school must change," he said.

Warner called the billionaire philanthropist's remarks "not only a powerful message, but a powerful prescription" and said it's up to the governors of each state to begin making these changes a reality.

David Gergen, former editor of *U.S. and World Report* and a professor at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, called Gates' speech "a searing indictment of high schools as they exist today." Gergen said it's the "very essence of leadership" that compels the nation's governors to respond with reforms that have their constituents' best interests at heart.

Rather than simply talk about what needs to be done, the governors returned from closed-door meetings Sunday with a clear agenda for action, announcing two nationwide initiatives intended to help schools implement critical reforms and raise the bar on student achievement.

Recognizing how difficult and often expensive system-wide reforms can be, Warner announced the creation of a \$42 million competitive grant program to which schools can apply as they begin rolling out the changes outlined during the summit.

The program is being funded in part through a rare partnership between several of the nation's leading private charitable foundations, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Wallace Foundation, the Prudential Foundation, and the State Farm Foundation.

Warner called the outpouring "an unprecedented collaboration between state government and the philanthropic community" and said he hoped the grant would lay "the foundation for long-term systemic change."

In a separate reform effort, 13 states have partnered with Achieve Inc. to create a new coalition dedicated to improving high school achievement by fostering better communication between high schools, institutions of higher learning, and employers in the business community--all three of which were criticized during the summit for failing to articulate clearly the evolving expectations of students in today's economy.

Dubbed the American Diploma Project Network, the coalition seeks to provide a set of benchmarks that will more readily prepare high school students for college and a successful future. Though governors offered little insight as to how the network would work, except to say that each state would be able to choose its own course, they did highlight four broad action steps designed to equip students for the road ahead: a concerted effort to raise the level of academic rigor in high school courses, a requirement that all high school curricula be aligned with a series of college and workforce prerequisites outlined by Achieve, standardized tests to determine how likely individual learners are to



On the final day of the summit, Education Secretary Margaret Spellings talked about President Bush's plan to extend the No Child Left Behind law into the nation's high schools. (Photo courtesy National Governors Association)

succeed in college and work, and an accountability structure that will hold high schools and colleges responsible for the students they graduate.

Both initiatives address concerns outlined in a 25-page action agenda issued by NGA leaders at the outset of the meeting.

"For the needed changes in high schools to occur, state leaders must now set goals for improvement, measure progress, and hold high schools and post-secondary institutions accountable for student success," the report stated. "To accomplish these goals, states need to dramatically improve their ability to collect, coordinate, and use secondary and postsecondary data. Few states have data systems that can gauge how well schools prepare students for college and work."

When it comes to making better use of student data, governors say, technology is already having an impact. According to NGA's report, several organizations--including Standard and Poor's and the National Center for Educational Accountability--have developed web sites that enable parents to compare schools within and across states. But, they caution, just tracking these data isn't enough. "This information should become more focused on the success of each high school in preparing students for college, work, and citizenship," the report states.

That's where the coalition believes it can help.

"For the first time, a group of states will reshape an American institution that has far outlasted its effectiveness," said Ohio Gov. Bob Taft, a Republican, who also serves as co-chair of Achieve. "This is the biggest step schools can take to restore the value of the high school diploma."

Of course, reform costs money. And as the governors sought to lay out their plans, reporters questioned where the funds for these ambitious statewide projects would come from--aside from grants, which can only do so much.

Though Warner acknowledged there would be certain costs involved, he cautioned that not all reforms are bank-breakers. "It's not all about money," he said in a briefing with reporters, adding that some reforms can be implemented "cheaply and quickly."

Those already taking shape in Virginia include online tutorials and web-based professional development programs for teachers, as well as statewide Advanced Placement courses for students and other virtual learning opportunities designed to give kids a head start on earning college-level credits.

The governors' recommendations come a critical time, as President Bush is preparing to expand his signature No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the sweeping federal law that requires schools to demonstrate sustained student gains through standardized test scores, into the nation's high schools.

Throughout the two-day meeting, governors touted the philosophy behind NCLB, praising the law for its intentions, especially its focus on higher accountability and standards--but they stopped short of billing their own statewide initiatives as a scaled-down version of the federal law.

Rather than welcoming top-down federal mandates about what must be done in their states, the governors called on Bush administration officials to partner with them in aligning national goals for education reform, especially in the high schools, where students are dropping out and falling behind in record numbers.

Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, an architect of NCLB, said she was open to suggestions for ways to improve the law, but cautioned that some areas are not open to negotiation.

"I am traveling the nation and listening to your concerns," Spellings told attendees on the final day of the summit. "But we draw a bright line on the lynchpins of this law." Among the requirements that are non-negotiable are annual testing of all students and the disaggregation of data to track student success. Spellings also touted the president's plan to bring NCLB accountability into the nation's high schools, calling on governors to "make a high school diploma a ticket to success in the 21st century."

Though the president's 2006 education budget falls nearly a billion dollars short of what Congress approved for schools last year, Spellings said the spending plan consolidates programs in order to give more flexibility to states, so that governors can fund and promote initiatives that work best for their citizens.

Huckabee, who will assume the NGA chairmanship when Warner steps down this summer, called NCLB "potentially the most significant education reform in our lifetime." He cautioned that achieving its promise is not the "federal government's responsibility," but one that belongs to the states.

Although governors in many states have publicly supported the basic tenets of the law, state legislatures have often indicated an unwillingness to comply, indicating they want still more flexibility in deciding what's best for students.

"In order to reach the No Child Left Behind Act's lofty expectations, changes need to be made in the law's foundation," said National Conference of State Legislatures President John Hurson, a member of the Maryland House of Delegates, in a Feb. 23 statement articulating his organization's take on the federal law.

The first education summit for state governors was organized in 1989 by then-President George H.W. Bush. Since that time, the nation's governors have met on four separate occasions--in 1996, 1999, 2001, and again this year--to address problems in the nation's education system, though 2005 marks the first time the summit focused solely on high schools. To help implement the reforms outlined at the summit, governors were asked to bring state leaders from the public and private sectors to weigh in on the discussions and forge a plan for action at home.

It isn't just educators and policy makers who are concerned. Business leaders, too, have a vested interest in seeing today's students succeed. And several of the nation's top executives, including Gates, expressed interest in investing both political and financial capital in realigning the current education system to better prepare students for their future.

"We are not keeping pace," explained Kerry Killinger, chairman and chief executive officer of Washington Mutual and vice chairman of Achieve Inc., at a morning press briefing with reporters. Killinger said it's up to business leaders, educators, and policy makers at the state level to devise a plan that will "have a meaningful impact on the quality of education for our children."

"Without us," he asked, "who are [students] going to turn to?"

#### **Links:**

Achieve Inc.  
<http://www.achieve.org/>

National Governors Association  
<http://www.nga.org>

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation  
<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/default.htm>